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SUBJECT: UNIONS UNDECIDED ABOUT POSSIBLE LABOR STRIKE ON
MARCH 31

Classified By: POL/ECON CHIEF SHANNON CAZEAU FOR REASON 1.4 B AND D

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The unions are undecided about whether or not they will push for a strike on March 31, and unions leaders appear divided. Negotiations continue, but union leaders say that much will depend on the recommendation issued by the Committee de Suivi and the president,s subsequent reaction. At the same time, the government,s unsustainable fuel subsidy program continues to be a major issue. Union leaders say that they are willing to sacrifice the subsidy, but the government must offer other economic concessions in return. While significant attention is on the unions, they are not the only political actors at work in Guinea. Tensions are high and it seems increasingly likely that a random event could spark civil unrest, with or without a strike. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) On March 25, Poloff met with union leaders Mme Rabiattou Sera Diallo and Dr. Ibrahim Fofana who co-chair the Unions-Intersyndicale. Prior to the meeting, Rabiattou called POL LES and asked if the Embassy really wanted her to be at the meeting with Fofana since they were generally - on the same page.8 During the meeting, both Fofana and Rabiattou graciously deferred to each other, making sure that each had time to voice their opinions. However, at various times, Poloff saw both of them either looking away or rolling their eyes when the other spoke. They were in a hurry as they had been in meetings all day and were already late for a meeting with the IMF and World Bank when they arrived for Poloff,s meeting. Fofana was animated while Rabiattou seemed tired.

NO PLAN TO STRIKE, BUT WE MAY HAVE TO

¶3. (C) Regarding a possible labor strike on March 31, Rabiattou said that the unions never said March 31 was a deadline for a strike, but rather, the completion date for the work of the Committee de Suivi. She emphasized that the unions currently do not have any plans to strike and that they will continue to dialogue in order to find a workable solution to Guinea,s ongoing political crisis. However, Rabiattou said that the general population does not understand that March 31 is not a strike deadline and that they need to be informed. She added that people are preparing for a strike, prices are rising, and people are stocking up on supplies. At one point, she shrugged her shoulders with seeming frustration and said &I don,t know why everyone thinks we are going to have a strike on the 31st.8

¶4. (C) Fofana agreed that the unions currently do not have any plans to strike on the 31st. However, he said that the

unions do expect to see progress towards resolving the concerns they outlined in early January 2008, and if demands are not met, the unions will strike. When asked to clarify what an acceptable solution would be, he said that Conte needs to sign a new government restructuring decree, replacing the one of December 5, that clearly delineates the powers of the prime minister and the consensus government. He said that the government had already proposed an alternate decree, but that it was unacceptable because it did not address the PM's powers. &The prime minister position does not legally exist right now because the December 5 decree reversed the 2007 agreements,8 he said.

15. (C) Later in the discussion, Rabiatoú said that while the unions may not strike on Monday, that does not mean that other elements won't take to the streets. Fofana added that &what could really spark a strike are high level acts (president or prime minister) that we are not consulted about.8

16. (C) To clarify, Poloff asked Fofana if he meant that if the issue of the PM's position and delegated powers is not resolved by the 31st, if that means that the unions will strike. He said &I do not want to link the two.8 Later on in the discussion however, he again emphasized that the president must accept to clarify the PM's powers and that failure to do so would likely bring on a strike. Fofana also pointed out that the unions have not issued any formal notice of intent to strike, which is standard operating procedure. &If we plan to strike, we will issue a formal notice,8 he said.

YOU CAN TAKE THE FUEL SUBSIDY, BUT GIVE US SOMETHING ELS

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17. (C) Both Rabiatoú and Fofana were concerned about increasing economic pressures. Rabiatoú said that the unions are not against removing or eliminating the government fuel subsidy, but that if it is done, the government must do it in consultation with the unions and offer some sort of acceptable economic relief such as a rice subsidy. Poloff told the union leaders that the Guinean Government cannot afford to maintain the current subsidy and doing so would seriously jeopardize the country's IMF program, as could new subsidy programs. Rabiatoú said that they understand the issue, but that the average Guinean does not, and they will react violently. Fofana said that if the price of fuel increases, so will prices on most other commodities in order to account for increased transportation costs.

HAITIAN ENVOY FROM THE UN TO FACILITATE DIALOGUE

18. (C) Rabiatoú mentioned that she and Fofana had met earlier in the day with Mr. Gerard Latortue, a former prime minister of Haiti, who is currently in Guinea as a UN envoy to help facilitate dialogue. She said that Latortue is &really welcome8 in that a neutral third party is needed to effectively negotiate between various actors. According to Rabiatoú, Latortue analyzed the January 2007 Accords and identified many problems related to the structuring of the consensus government. She said that since Latortue was appointed prime minister under similar circumstances in Haiti, he is well placed to assist with the process in Guinea.

19. (C) Fofana chimed in and said that Accords need to be rectified in order to address inherent weaknesses in the structure that was established. &We could replace Kouyate tomorrow, but that would not fix anything because the system is broken,8 he said.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Fofana and Rabiadou were sending mixed messages. Tone of speech and body language, as well as what was said, suggests that the two union leaders do not see eye to eye with regards to a possible strike on March 31. For the time being, neither one felt that a strike on Monday is a sure thing. At the same time, Fofana,s comments suggest that he is more willing to consider a strike, especially if the government does not meet union demands. Both Fofana,s and Rabiadou,s viewpoints are consistent with comments they have made during individual meetings with Poloff, with Rabiadou advocating against a strike and Fofana pushing for one.

¶11. (C) The unions are unlikely to get what they want, as it was outlined in the discussion with Poloff. President Conte has resisted officially delineating the PM,s powers, and events in early 2008 seem to have only strengthened his hand while the PM,s power and support have waned. On the economic side, the fuel issue is becoming increasingly problematic. The consensus government needs to get rid of the subsidy program, but is likely unable to offer economic concessions that will pacify the population.

¶12. (C) Support for a strike, at least at the leaders, level, appears to be mixed. Much depends on events over the next few days, including the official recommendation of the Committee de Suivi and the president,s reaction to it. However, the unions are only one of the many political elements at work in Guinea. Tensions are high and it seems increasingly likely that a random event could spark civil unrest, with or without a strike. END COMMENT.
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